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ABSTRACT

The need to train speech communication students for new, nonacademic forms of employment has raised questions about whether the doctoral dissertation is of any significant value anymore and whether doctoral degree requirements should be modified. Ideally, the dissertation is supposed to contribute to the fund of scholarly knowledge in a student's field of study, familiarize the student with the tools of scholarly research, and promote the mental characteristics of self-discipline and perseverance. Unfortunately, in an effort to find a topic that is "do-able," students and advisors often minimize the question of whether the topic is worth doing. In addition, dissertations do not always demonstrate a student's grasp of the research process and, most importantly, dissertations do not demonstrate competencies needed outside of academic employment, such as managerial or interpersonal relation skills. Alternatives to the dissertation are twofold. The first involves completion of a research paper stressing the interpretation or use of existing research of a socially relevant nature. The second alternative involves the completion of an internship or "field experience" project, in which the student works at a job related to his or her academic training and analyzes the experience for academic credit. Clearly, a balance is needed between the conduct of research and its translation to everyday work. (HTH)

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ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION

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ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION

Since the days when medieval students stood to debate them in university courtyards, doctoral dissertations have been an integral part of graduate education. Other parts have changed through the years, coursework is different, language requirements have been modified, and there have been suggestions to modify the post-coursework comprehensive exam.[1] The dissertation, however, has remained pretty much what it always was: An example of original scholarly research, meant to demonstrate superior qualities of mind and reason, and the ultimate test of admission to the highest university degree.

Recent pressures on graduate education, however, raise the question of whether the traditional dissertation is an idea whose time has passed. Such things as the need to train students for new, nonacademic forms of employment have caused some authors to wonder if the dissertation is of any significant value anymore, and if it too shouldn't be modified. This article discusses some advantages and disadvantages to the traditional dissertation, and then considers the desirability of some possible alternatives to it for the future.

The Purpose of a Dissertation

Let us begin with the purpose of a dissertation. Why is it written? Ideally, what is it supposed to do?

According to the pronouncements of college faculties and graduate school catalogues, one purpose of a dissertation is to contribute to the fund of scholarly knowledge in a student's field of study. The image of thousands of students dilligently working on dissertations fits nicely with the time-honored belief that knowledge is infinite, and that learned men and women have a sacred obligation to expand its frontiers. This knowledge-generating function seems especially important to our field, which has suffered for some time from doubts about its identity and academic legitimacy. Over forty years ago, Franklin Knower bemoaned the fact that most graduate degrees in speech were being granted without a thesis on grounds that it hurt the establishment of the field as a scientific discipline.[2] More recently, Downs, Goldberg, and Thurber have defended the thesis requirement on grounds that it is needed to build the respectability of the field.[3]

Another purpose of a dissertation is to familiarize a student with the tools of scholarly research. One wouldn't have much confidence, goes the reasoning, in a lawyer who had never tried a case or a surgeon who had never performed an operation, so how could one have much confidence in a researcher who had never conducted research? In this view, writing a dissertation is essentially a learning experience, wherein one develops facility at using the instruments, procedures, etc. which will make him or her a competent practitioner of a profession. It is based on the premise that, like law, medicine, or any other activity, it is impossible to learn research by learning <u>about</u> it. Rather, there comes a time when a student must get out into the field and <u>do</u> it, presumably under the wise

tutelage of persons (read advisor and graduate committee) who have already done it.

Yet a third purpose of a dissertation is to promote the mental characteristics of self-discipline and perserverance. If one asks people who have finished their dissertations what they learned from them, most would probably say that the benefits were intangible and subjective. True, they may well have learned such practical skills as how to do a statistical correlation or how to program a computer in FORTRAN, but they also learned the virtues of patience and determination. They learned how to stick with a task until it was done, even when it was no longer "fun" or enjoyable. They learned how to tolerate slow, or no, progress and still push on to a goal. And most of all, they learned how to work on their own, and for themselves, with minimal help from others. These are not minor achievements, of course; They are really what research is all about. For in point of fact, nearly all researchers, at least in the beginning, must labor in obscurity with few people knowing or caring about their work. By nature, research is often a solitary affair which a person must face alone and unsung, and a true researcher is one who can do this when it might be more tempting to give up and quit. Thus, when viewed in part as an exercise in self-discipline, writing a dissertation helps build in students the necessary temperament of a scholar.

These are the presumed advantages of a dissertation, nurtured through a thousand years of academic history. In principle, it is hard to fault any of them. Few would deny that the generation of knowledge is important to a field if it is to grow and prosper, and few would deny that

students must learn how to generate knowledge if they are to participate in a field's growth and prosperity. Few would probably deny that generating knowledge is not easy, that it can be terribly frustrating and discouraging, and that developing the will to do it is at least as important as developing the skill. In practice, however, each of these advantages may be challenged on a number of grounds.

There is first the question of what dissertations produce by way of useful research. To judge from the number which are ever published or are ever cited (except maybe by their authors) in scholarly books or articles, the answer would seem to be very little. Most are written, approved, and ignored by all but Dissertation Abstracts. A primary reason for this may be that in the drive to find a dissertation topic that is "do-able," students and advisors often minimize the question of whether a topic is worth doing. Consider, for example, the titles of some recent studies in speech quoted by La Ban: "Effects of Status Difference, Social Setting and Equity on the Evaluation of Persons Who Criticize Others"; "A Content Analysis Study of Written Communications About Social Perception: The Effect of Sentiment and Interaction Frequency Upon Plural Self-Reference and Length of Response"; "An Analysis of the Frequency, Duration and Direction of Interaction Between Coaches and Players of the Interior Offensive Line of a College Football Team".[4] Admittedly, there are differing opinions on what constitutes a worthwhile topic, but it is difficult to see the value of topics like these, beyond the mere fact that they haven't been done before. They are so narrow and esoteric that it is difficult to see their relevance to real human problems or issues, or to see what implications they

may have for additional research. This leads to the claim that much graduate research is trivial and inane, and could probably be eliminated with no great loss to the world's wealth of wisdom.[5]

There is second the question of how well dissertations can demonstrate a student's grasp of the research process. It is no secret that the standards for dissertations may vary, that a dissertation which might be acceptable in one department might not be acceptable in another, and this is intensified by the fact that there appear to be few, if any, objective criteria for evaluating dissertations. Indeed, by definition of being a unique piece of work a dissertation would seem to defy objective appraisal, certainly in anything approaching the measurable terms of competency-based learning.[6] Typically, the sole judgment of its quality rests on the personal (albeit expert) impressions of the graduate committee, who, the cynics would say, may or may not have carefully read it. As a result, it is difficult to say just what a student has learned from a dissertation aside from certain mechanical abilities and a certain set of work habits -- which brings us to the scholarly temperament argument. There is no doubt that a student who completes a dissertation will acquire certain attitudes from it: A respect for impartial observation, for critical analysis of data, and for cautious interpretation of results.[7] The question is whether these attitudes are always beneficial, or whether they may sometimes prevent a student from drawing strong conclusions from data when conclusions seem clearly warranted. In the popular mind, this signifies the meaning of the word "academic" as something immaterial, cold, detached, and bloodless.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the dissertation, however, is that even at its best it equips a student for only a limited range of practical employment opportunities. Specifically, while it may be good for demonstrating the competencies of research and writing customarily expected in academic employment, it may not be as good for demonstrating the competencies expected in nonacademic employment, where the ability to do scholarly research, though useful, is not as critical. In fact, there are competencies which a dissertation cannot demonstrate very well, such as managerial skill or skill in interpersonal relations, and these are often the ones most highly valued in nonacademic employment. Even when research is valued, moreover, writing a dissertation may not be the best preparation for it. A recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education carries the story of a young historian who obtained a position in research with the U.S. Department of Defense, and found that his graduate training was ill-suited to his work. He had rarely been involved in day-to-day research using primary sources of data. He had never learned the technique of interviewing as a means of gathering data. He was not accustomed to meeting regular deadlines, or to the overwhelming volume of research needed to produce a government document. He was not used to working as part of a team of researchers, though this is the environment in which much nonacademic research is done.[8]

This is not the place to discuss the merits of "careerism" in graduate education; They have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.[9] Suffice it to say that if students in our field and others expect to find employment in the future, large numbers of them are going to have to turn to

nonacademic sources. As another recent issue of The Chronicle has observed, meeting this need will determine which fields continue to attract students, and how those students are taught. In the words of Nathan Keyfitz, Chairman of the Sociology Department at Harvard: "Instead of teaching our students how to do scholarly research, spend ten years on a book, and come up with the answer to academic questions, we'll be teaching them how to do a report and meet a deadline six months away."[10] In short, then, when combined with the other reservations about the dissertation, as communication graduates move into new jobs with new job functions, it seems appropriate to ask whether new ways of judging their capabilities may not be necessary.

Alternatives to the Dissertation

At the Ph.D. level, alternatives to the dissertation are apparently nonexistent. Of the 43 departments of speech communication listed as offering a Ph.D. in the 1977-78 SCA Directory of Graduate Programs, all require a formal dissertation. Some indication of options to the dissertation, however, may be gained by looking at the requirements for the masters degree (where significantly, many departments do not require a thesis), and for the Doctor of Arts degree.

Essentially, alternatives to the dissertation are twofold. The first involves the completion of a "research paper," which differs from the traditional dissertation in stressing the interpretation or utilization of research rather than the creation of original research. As conceived in the D.A. degree, it focuses on pedagogical or "real world" kinds of

research questions instead of the more abstract and theoretical ones often considered in the Ph.D.[11] Generally, it exposes students to research of a more pragmatic, "socially relevant" nature, and so can avoid the arcanity of some dissertation research. At the same time, it can reveal the same capacity to do research as the dissertation does, but in a manner which may make that capacity easier to judge objectively. There are many possibilities for such a paper, in communication auditing of organizations, the development of training materials and instructional programs, the formulation of communication strategies for campaigns or public relations efforts, and the replication of previous research studies. Thus, while the paper provides little in the way of new knowledge, it can still contribute to knowledge by way of reaffirming what is already known, and especially by developing new applications for it.

The other alternative involves the completion of an internship or "field experience" project. As described by Downs, Harper, and Hunt, an internship is an arrangement whereby a student works at a job related to his or her academic training and analyzes the experience for academic credit.[12] Typically, the internship lasts for one quarter or semester, though it may run longer for appropriate projects. Typically, the intern is placed in an off-campus job, though on-campus jobs can also be used. The experience has a number of benefits for the student, including the opportunities to gain first-hand work knowledge, build contacts for potential employment, and in many cases discover problems for research. Frequently, the internship may be combined with the paper

idea above, with the intern's experience providing a useful topic for investigation. Not incidentally, an internship also has benefits for the intern's employer, and for the intern's department. For the employer, it offers the services of a trained individual at low, or no, cost, as well as a chance to appraise that individual for prospective hiring. For the department, it most obviously offers a chance to improve the department's "visibility," both on and off campus, with both students and the community. This of course may have advantages in student recruitment and in public support for the department's program.

Internships must be carefully arranged and supervised to be effective, and as McBath and Burhans have observed, at least four key decisions must be made: Which students should be allowed to participate in an internship; What type of internship positions should be developed; Who should be responsible for setting up an internship; And how should the internship experience be administered and evaluated.[13] Ideally, students should be matched with positions in their areas of interest involving the kind of work they hope to be doing following graduation. Care must be taken to insure that the intern's position is truly "responsible," permitting him or her to develop meaningful skills, or the experience will be mere busy work and a waste of time. Finally, standards of performance perhaps in the form of a "learning contract" must be firmly established and agreed to be everyone concerned. When these things are done, the internship can be a very positive part of a student's education, presenting the opportunity to demonstrate one's competence in the fullest sense of the word.

Many departments currently offer some kind of internship experience, and some authors have suggested it as a compliment to the dissertation. Redding, for instance, has advocated internships "either associated with or separate from dissertation research."[14] Yet a common reply to the notion that they should replace the dissertation is: "If students want practical experience, why not let them get a masters or a D.A. degree? The Ph.D. is a research degree!" In the case of the masters, an answer to this might be that an additional year of training beyond the B.A. may simply not be sufficient to give students the skills they need to handle sophisticated communication problems in nonacademic settings, just as it is assumed to be insufficient to handle them in academic ones. As for the D.A., while it could conceivably be used the fact is that it is unavailable. After a brief flurry of interest in the degree in the late 1960's and early 1970's, during which a dozen departments of speech communication contemplated plans to offer it, enthusiasm for it has dropped to near zero. Presently, only one department in the country (North Texas State University) offers a version of it, and in 1976-77 the program enrolled just three students. Instead, many advocates of the D.A. have suggested reforming the Ph.D., most noticeably by modifying the disertation requirement to allow the substitution of internships or practicum work.[15] It is a proposal with some merit, for if we are sincere in our desire to provide nonacademic employment for our students, we ought to be willing to do it with our strongest, most prestigious degree.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Surely, few people would urge that the dissertation be completely abandoned. Most departments could not do that even if they wanted to, since it is normally a university requirement for the Ph.D. Besides, it serves a critical function, even in its most traditional form. There is something to be said for "pure" research which does nothing more than inspire the intellect, and for studying things for no other reason than because they are interesting. On the other hand, there is something to be said for utilizing research knowledge for the practical resolution of real problems. Clearly, a balance is needed, both in the conduct of research and in its translation to everyday work.

What may be most desirable is a dual-track system for the Ph.D., providing traditional as well as nontraditional dissertation options. For students intending to do academic work or original research in the scholarly mode, the traditional dissertation might be elected. For students (perhaps the majority) intending to do nonacademic work, an internship might be elected along with some sort of "applied" research paper. Both options would be equally rigorous, equally subject to high standards of performance, and neither would be "better" than the other. They would simply recognize that for different types of professional employment, different professional emphases may be useful.

In the August, 1978 issue of Spectra, SCA President Jane Blankenship called for the formation of a task-force on Alternative Career Opportunities in Speech Communication. Among the task-force's duties is to be a review of curricula in speech communication to discover ways of

making them more suitable for nonacademic needs. An alternative to the traditional dissertation might well be a matter for that group's consideration.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James E. Sayer, Lawrence J. Chase, and Norbert H. Mills, "Graduate Study in Speech Communication: The Post-Coursework Comprehensive Examination--1975," ACA Bulletin, 13 (August, 1975), 40-42.

[2]Franklin H. Knower, "Some Present Problems and Next Steps in Graduate Work in Speech," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 23 (October, 1937), 456-468.

[3]Calvin Downs, Alvin Goldberg, and John Thurber, "A Consideration of Graduate Degrees in Speech Communication," Central States Speech Journal, 22 (Fall, 1971), 202-206.

[4]Frank K. La Ban, "Graduate Degree Programs in Speech Communication: Description and Assessment," Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, December, 1976. As La Ban points out, the significance of these titles becomes clearer when they are compared with the titles of some recent graduate studies in other fields: "Technology in Developing Countries: The Future"; "Swine Flu as a Hazard to Human Health"; "Poliomyelitis in a Changing World".

[5]On the general matter of overspecialization in graduate education, see for example: Herbert L. Packer, "Piling Higher and Deeper: The Shame of the Ph.D.," Change (November/December, 1970), 51.

[6]The reference here, of course, is to the specification of behavioral objectives and performance skills which can be learned to designated criterion levels. For an interesting treatment of these concepts as they might apply to graduate work in the future, see: D. Thomas Porter, and Jean M. Civikly, "Graduate Education in 1984: Bye, Bye American Pie," Today's Speech, 20 (Summer, 1972), 27-34.

[7]As regards cautious interpretation, it is worth mentioning what George A. Miller (Language and Communication, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951) has to say about the verb-adjective ratio in dissertation writing: "It is interesting to note that theses written for the master's degree have 1.5 verbs for every adjective, but by the time the candidate reaches his Ph.D. thesis he manages to reduce the ratio to 1:1. In one Ph.D. thesis a cautious writer used two qualifications for every active construction, a verb-adjective ratio of 0.5". (p. 128)

[8]"Where Are the Jobs? Outside Academe, More and More Historians Find," The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 8, 1979, 1, 11.

[9]See for example: Patrick Kennecott, and L. David Schuelke (eds.), Career Communication: Direction for the Seventies (New York: Speech Communication Association, 1972); And especially James H. McBath, and David T. Burhans, Communication Education for Careers (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1975).

[10]"The Enrollment Roller Coaster: Colleges Fear the Big Dip," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 5, 1978, p. 12.

[11]Charles U. Larson, "A Case for the Doctor of Arts in Speech Communication," Central States Speech Journal, 24 (Spring, 1973), 60-64.

[12]Cal W. Downs, Paul Harper, and Gary Hunt, "Internships in Speech Communication," Communication Education, 25 (November, 1976), 276-282.

[13]Communication Education for Careers, pp. 92-102.

[14]W. Charles Redding, "Training the Ph.D. Student in Speech-Communication for Nonacademic Employment," Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, December, 1975.

[15]See for example: Bruce E. Gronbeck, "An Inventory of Attitudes Toward the Doctor of Arts in Speech," Speech Teacher, 21 (November, 1972), 265-272; And more generally P.L. Dressel, and M.M. Thompson, "The Doctor of Arts: A Decade of Development, 1967-1977," Journal of Higher Education, 49 (July/August, 1978), 329-336.